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Interview with B. B. Oliver, Beverly Oliver, Rusty Oliver, and Benjamin "Ted" Vontress (FA 80)

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OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLORE OF
MONUMENT MAKERS

Contents: 2 Sony cassettes, type HF 90. Catalog #'s 87.2.a and 87.2.b
and abridged transcripts

Interviewer's name: Kenneth Todd Gipson 4807 Palma Dr., Louisville,
Kentucky, 40272

Interviewee's names; B.B. Oliver, Beverly Oliver, Rusty Oliver,
and Benjamin "Ted" Vontress.

Interviewed at Carroll Monument Company, 615 Fairview Ave.,
Bowling Green, Kentucky, 6/30/87.

Recording equipment: Sony CFM 200

Amount of tape used: 87.2.a; all, 87.2.b.; side one only

Contents of interviews: Questions pertaining to personal work
habits and occupational narratives of the monument industry.

I

TAPE I SIDE A

T.G. What is your present occupation?

B.B. I do lettering out in the cemetery and monument cleaning and help in the shop when I'm needed. I am retired.

T.G. Do you talk to other people while you work?

B.B. Mostly in the shop, occasionally in the cemetery.

T.G. When do you usually take lunch?

B.B. Lots of times I don't, because I'm out in the boon-docks, but I usually carry a snack like fritos.

T.G. What else do you eat for lunch ?

B.B. If you run into a country store, I might get sardines, beanie weenies, or a bologna sandwich.

T.G. Are there any stories about any people you work with eating a lot, or unusual foods?

B.B. I don't recall any off hand. Ted likes turnip greens and hog jowls.

T.G. Do you ever have a pot luck dinner at the shop?

B.B. Not necessarily, but we have had steak fries for our employees out at Beech Bend. We have it around the middle of summer. It's not a set thing, but occasionally, we'll do it.

T.G. When did you start that?

B.B. About seven or eight years ago.

T.G. How do you decide who brings what?

B.B. We bring the steaks and the employees bring snacks.

T.G. What do you do on special occasions?

B.B. Maybe give them a card in remembrance.

T.G. No special dinners?

B.B. No

T.G. Can you tell by looking at a customer what they want.

B.B. No. Everybody's different. That's why we have so many different things on display. Most people don't know what they want when they come in.

T.G. Do you ever play any pranks on each other?

B.B. I gave Ted some ex-lax one time, and told him it was chocolate candy. He got some pretty good results.

T.G. Is there any kind of initiation for new employees?

B.B. No, we just put them to work.

T.G. Have you ever sent anyone after an imaginary object?

B.B. No. Depends on the individual.

T. G. What do you do for safety around here?

B.B. We wear safety glasses and earplugs.

T.G. Are there any beliefs that something bad will happen if you don't do something a certain way?

B.B. Not really, there's more or less a standard procedure depending on what size stone you are working with and the ground type.

T.G. Are there any jokes told in the shop?

B.B. Yes, but they aren't very good to put on tape.

T.G. What's a joke that you could tell?

B.B. Ordinarily, I could think of a hundred, but right now I can't remember any. Bob's the joke teller.

T.G. Do you know any ghost stories?

B.B. No, but one time I was lettering a stone and it got

dark. I wasn't really scared, but I was nervous.

T.G. Does anything bring bad luck on the job?

B.B. Working on Sunday. usually we lose if we work on Sunday. One time we broke a stone before we could set it. It cost us to replace it. That's all I know that brings bad luck.

T.G. What terms do you use, that people outside the monument industry would not understand?

B.B. They used to call Mr. Carroll, Mr. Gottrocks.

T.G. What other stories do you know about monument makers?

B.B. There were two brothers in Franklin, that work together for about twenty years, without speaking to each other.

T.G. How do you feel about your children being in the monument business?

B.B. If they like it, stay in it. If they don't, get out. It's that simple. I like it, that's why I stay in it.

T.G. How do you like being semi-retired?

B.B. I like it now that I got used to it. I didn't like not doing anything, but I'm conditioning myself to it.

T.G. Do monument people, look after each other in times of ill health?

B.B. I suppose they would if something bad happened, but otherwise, they try to cut each others throat in business. We've helped out by lending compressors for the sand blast machines. Most places have only one compressor and inevitably, it will break down during your busiest time. We've helped and been helped.

T.G. What story stands out most in your mind about the monument industry?

B.B. Mr. Carroll had been down to Franklin and heard some people running him down. He came back and told his daddy, and his daddy told him to mind his own business. Said when they quit talking about you, its time to worry, 'cause if they're talking about you, you're hurting their business.

INTERVIEW WITH BEVERLY OLIVER AND B.B.

T.G. Beverly, what do you do?

Bev. I'm office manager, secretary, and design specialist.

T.G. Do you get to talk to other people while your working?

Bev. Yes.

T.G. When do you take lunch?

Bev. That could be anywhere from one to three o'clock?

T.G. What do you usually eat?

Bev. B.'s wife cooks for us, so we have home cooked meals for us every day.

T.G. Meat and potatoes type menu?

Bev. Yeah, and vegetables.

T.G. Do you know about anyone here eating strange foods or large quantities of food?

Bev. Lots of foods I think are strange, like oysters, and everybody here eats oysters. We tease Bobby about eating. He likes junk food.

B.B. Yeah, that kitchen looked like Kroger. He had more stuff in there than Kroger.

Bev. Potato chips, Doritos. He had it all.

T.G. What about Christmas.

Bev. It's not really a meal, but we do have finger sandwiches and stuff. We eat and exchange gifts.

T.G. Who brings what?

Bev. Usually I do. But its a whole lot easier to call Kroger and have them make a party tray.

T.G. I guess you deal with most of the customers don't you?

Bev. Not the sales part, but I take care of bills and special designs.

T.G. Has there been a particular customer that has been hard to work with?

Bev. We have alot of them. Alot of them want something unusual. Something from their life.

B.B. Here's the beginning of one. (Showed a drawing of farmer and mules) Evidently , this guy did alot of logging with mules.

Bev. We did one with a horse and buggy. They went on their honey moon in a horse and buggy.

B.B. They were married in that buggy too.

Bev. And also roller-skates, boxing gloves, biblical scenes.

B.B. Alot of people like to personalize them. The old man that was murdered in Roundhill, we put a facsimile of his store on his monument.

T.G. Have you played any pranks on anybody?

Bev. Let's see. (husband Rusty walks in.) Have I played any pranks on you Rusty?

Rusty Not here.

T.G. Do you have any beliefs that something brings bad luck?

Bev. No, I'm not superstitious. I notice many customers are.
They'll only go out the door they came in.

T.G. Do you know any stories about ghosts?

Bev. When we were in high-school, they used to tell a about
the ghost of Middlebridge. Supposedly she floats up
the cliff. I think there's a cemetery on top the
cliff.

B.B. That used to be the parking place for students. That
used to be happy hunting ground. Then some boys would
climb up the cliff and would throw rocks down the
cliff.

T.G. Do you think that story was made up to keep people
away?

B.B. No I don't think it discouraged anyone at all.

Bev. It probably got more people out there. Sometimes the
vapor under the lights started the rumor.

T.G. What about jokes around here?

Bev. There are joke around here constantly, but I'm not one
for remembering them.

T.G. Does anything bring you bad luck.

Bev. No, but when I come to work and they say "I'm glad
you're here", I know I've got lots of work to do.

T.G. Are there any monument terms that you know that someone
outside the business might know?

Bev. I guess calling a monument tablet a die. It took me
awhile to get used to that.

T.G. Do you know any stories about monument makers.

Bev. Mr. Carroll would be full of those, so would Dwight

Smith.

B.B. Dwight Smith is our representative in Morgantown and he would be full of stories. He made a bunch of tapes with his niece. He's got alot of good ones.

Bev. Where's his old funeral wagon?

B.B. He donated his horse drawn hearse to the Kentucky Building, I think.

Rus. Woodbury

B.B. Woodbury, down by the Green River Museum. They've

got some good food down there by the way.

T.G. Would you like your children to be in the monument business?

Bev. If he liked the work I suppose it would be fine.

B.B. I never expected Rusty to be in it. It was a big surprise to me.

Bev. He always had a coat and tie job, but he likes it. It's a good job, because your exposed to a large cross section of people.

B.B. You get to work with everyday people.

T.G. How do you feel about retiring?

Bev. Retirement isn't bad, if you have something else to do.

I stayed home when my son was born and after two years, my brain was jello. I had to go find a part time job.

T.G. Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to talk about?

Bev. No, except that Dwight and Mr. Carroll could tell you

more.

B.B. He could tell alot about Butler County. My Dad was the same way about Warren County, especially stories about the river [B.B. then goes on to tell stories about the Barren and Green rivers and how his dad piloted a river boat.]

Tape 1 Side B

T.G. Tell me about the gypsies
 B.B. Well 4 or 5 years ago this gypsy wanted to buy a mausoleum. He was from Washington D.C. and he was going around the country pricing mausoleums. We bid on it, but I don't know where he end up buying it. (Back-ground noise, someone on the telephone.) I think a wholesaler down in Elberton Georgia ended up making it. I think it was set in Louisville, which was far from where everyone thought it would be set. He paid for it in cash, which could have been several thousand dollars; ten or fifteen thousand dollars.
 Alot of people were unsure about bidding on the project because he was dealing in cash. They didn't want to be stuck with this expensive mausoleum.

In New Jersey, this one guy had a memorial made to scale of a Mercedes for his brother. His brother used to drive a Mercedes, so when he died he had this memorial made up. It cost around \$100,000. This little monument company that got the job really turned around after that.

Bev. It amazes me that alot of those corners in the U.S. are Italian.

B.B. Yeah, they have the craftsmanship from the old country.
(Tape stops while B.B. goes into the shop.)

Bev. Remember when that monument fell on Rusty's leg?

B.B. That was probably the worst accident we've had around here.

Bev. What about when that pulley ran over four fingers?

B.B. Yeah, that was pretty bad. That overhand came in the shop. I was on the truck hooking up a monument and I braced myself on the trolly that the crane rides on and when I started taking up slack, that crane rolled over my fingers. The most stupid thing I ever made in my life. I was so mad because I was careless.

Rus. Darrlo Rossi was that Italians name

B.B. He was pure Italian.

Rus. He's about this tall (indicates about 5'3") and his nickname is the little chiseler. He's got this thing about hitting people in the gut. He about took her Daddy (Bev's father) down one time at a convention. He's so bad about it, that one of the owners of the company he works for bought an electric cattle prod. Darro doesn't come into the office anymore. But you

get out in his studio and he'll get you.

B.B. Me and Carroll went up to "Vermont one time and this sculptor had a poem with the busts of all the presidents. They do beautiful work up there.

(lots of shuffling of papers, Beverly is looking for pictures of sculpture.)

The Japanese do alot of carnation because of their lack of space. We went to Cincinnati one time and saw a cremation. It's like a big furnace, and when it's done, your ashes can fit in a box. They bury these people in the walls of these mausoleum called crypts. Hundreds can fit in these big rooms.

T.G. Is cremation popular around here?

B.B. It's gettin' to be, but its still a small percentage. Cause its so much cheaper than a regular burial.

Bev. Didn't they have a bunch of unclaimed ashes about at the cemetery?

B.B. Somewhere they did. There's some family I heard of that keeps the ashes of the deceased on the mantle. Blondie Wallace, of Ford Motor Company over here, when he died, he had his ashes spread over this bay in Florida when he retired.

Bev. You can bury a person in Kentucky anywhere you want to. We've set stones in front yards before. Also you don't have to be embalmed.

T.G. 'Most reputable funeral homes do enbalm anyway don't they?

Bev. Yes.

B.B. If they weren't embalmed, they would have to be buried the day after they died.

They used to have funerals in the home around here. Charlie, this guy that used to help us worked for a funeral director and said he used to keep away the cats. I don't know if that's true, but it sounds logical.

Bev. There's a guy in Louisville named Bob Futrell who could fill you in on alot of stuff.

T.G. Tell me about some of the Jewish ~~monuments~~ *monuments*.

B.B. Well, they're elaborate. A lot of marble and granite statues. They are expensive, in fact the older ones were made in Italy and shipped over, as were a lot of the old monuments done around the 1800's. Back then they were sold by mail order. Bob Futrell does alot of Jewish stones, but he usually gets them made up in Barre, Vermont.

The beginning of the monument industry in this country, started up in the Vermont area. Then they discovered granite in Georgia and a lot of the Italians moved down there. In fact the 2 biggest quarries in Elbaton Georgia are owned by Italians. They primarily supply granite for commercial use now. Here lately the Japanese have been buying alot of granite. Nobody knows why. They'll probably sell it back to us. They could probably make monuments over there and sell them here cheaper than we could make 'em. Just like in manufacturing, in automobile industry. Labor is cheaper

there. Mexico does that too.

T.G. Do you think this is a trend?

B.B. No, that's just speculation on my part, however they could do it. They are experts in duplication. They'll take something and improve it. They've even invaded the wine industry.

T.G. Do you think the quality in the monument industry is going down hill?

B.B. No, the granite is better, because the deeper you get in the granite, the better the stone.

(Lots of background noise, Ted walks in.)

B.B. This is ted. We were talkin about bad luck and superstitions.

Ted. Yea, about workin' on Sundays and what you do to people will come home to you- what goes around comes around- I believe that.

B.B. You ain't as superstitious as you used to be, are ya?

Ted. No, and ghosts.

Bev. Do you believe in ghosts?

Ted. No, not anymore.

Bev. Will you walk under a ladder?

Ted. Yeah, I have.

Bev. Do you go around a black cat?

Ted. Yeah, I think about a black cat crossing in front of me. The old people put that in my head.

T.G. Any stories about this business that stand out in your mind?

Ted. What business?

T.G. The monument business.

B.B. Not monkey business, monument business.

Ted. Oh , yeah, start out right you'll end right.

Bev. You don't know any short stories?

Ted. Years ago I used to hear em, but not anymore.

Bev. I know you've got a ton of stories.

Ted. Yeah.

B.B. You could tell em about you and Slim. We had this neighbor, and h e was bigger than Ted, a great big boy. Before they built the bridge in Morgantown, they had this ferry boat. Slim, Ted, and Waldo was crossing the ferry down at Morgantown, and he started to raise the gate at the wrong end of the ferry boat, and Slim said, 'He's gonna sink this ferry boat and I can't swim. Ted said, "Well I can't either!"

Then, we had a boy workin' here named Charlie, and he was moving the overhead crane, and he had to climb up a ladder to move the wire around so we could move it. He claimed it shocked him, but there wasn't any juice goin' to it. He went home and told his wife, and she said (imitating a black person) "Chahlie, don' you go up on dat laddah no mo'. You make dat big man go up on dat laddah."

Bev. The only thing I've heard these guys complain about is snakes in the cemetery. They'll crawl under these stones, and high grass.

B.B. Tell him about that one snake, I wasn't there.

Ted. I walked up on him, and he surprised me. I had a shovel in my hand, but I wasn't thinking. I ran with my shovel, and I went back to kill him and he was gone.

B.B. Rusty went with me one time- he was 16 or 17 years old- out here to Bethel. We was setting a stone, and there was this snake at the base of a monument. Well he ran all the way back to the car and jumped into it. It was a long time before he would come out and help me again.

Bev. Didn't we have a stone turn over on a little boy out on the alley?

B.B. Yeah, that was a bad happening. We had run 'em off the lot 2 or 3 times, and finally they went up to our storage we had up in the alley. We were working down here when the ambulance came up the alley, and we went to see what was going on. Well, one of the boys had turned this stone over on his leg. It was a bad break. It could have been bad, but the boys mother told Mr. Carroll that she didn't hold him responsible. Later on they tried to get some money out of it, but since they had witnesses to what she said, nothin' came of it.

Bev. Cemetery vandalism is something too. Since the recycling craze, people will steal the aluminum vases off of monuments and turn them in.

B.B. This memorial gardens on Scottsville Road had over \$15,000 worth of bronze vases taken. No telling how many of them they got.

T.G. Bob was telling me of this mausoleum at Fairview that was made without any vents and now the stone is discol-

ored. Tell me about that.

B.B. This happened in the last few years. There was a big fuss over it. Nobody wants to open it to find out. My guess is it's body fluid and gasses build up.

T.G. Besides the obvious reason that it would smell bad do you think the reason they don't want to open it has to do with superstition of disturbing a grave?

B.B. I don't know. The family that it belongs to just wants it fixed and to do that they would have to open it. I don't think superstition has anything to do with it.

Bev. Something that interested me was these family cemeteries where the graves are marked with field stones. The mother of a friend of mine knows who is buried where in their family plot. If the stone has two points on it that means twins were buried there. That was interesting.

T.G. Do people come in often to get a stone to mark graves that were previously marked with field stone?

B.B. Oh, Yeah. They also replace older stones that may have had stuff on 'em.

END OF TAPE.

TAPE 2

B.B. (continued) Well anyhow, this little old fellow came in here from Butler county and he had rode the bus from Morgantown to Forest Park. He walked over here from Forest Park and he wanted a little stone, about 18

inches long and he wanted the name and dates on it, but he also wanted on there buried by mistake. We found out later, that he and his wife had been separated, but they had a family, children ya know, but he lived in Butler County and she lived in Indianapolis. When she died they brought her down here to the Smith Funeral home and buried her in the Big Muddy Cemetery.

His name was Pay, Mr. Pay, and he came in here and gave us all the information he wanted put on it and said There's one other thing I'd like to put on that stone. "I'd like to put on there Buried by mistake." And that was a most unusual request, to be buried by mistake, but what he meant was she was buried in the wrong place from where he intended her to be buried.

I saw that stone not too long ago. I was doing some work down in the Big Muddy Cemetery, and that little stone is still there, with the name, birth and death dates, and just below, in small letters is "buried by mistake."

I don't know of any other incidence since I've been inn it that compared to that as far as putting unusual stuff on a stone. Of course we put alot of unusual stuff on stones, but that was one that really stood out in my mind.

That old feller was goin' carry that back to Forest Park in that grass sack. He was goin' to take it back and set it himself. I think Mr. Carroll took him over there to catch the bus, but he took it down there and set it. I was back there this last summer, and every time I see it, I can't help but remember how it all gone about.

Mr. Smith, Dwight Smith, the owner of the Funeral Home told us the reason for all of this, we had no idea why he would put buried by mistake on this. That was a piece of conversation around here for a pretty good while. Course when Dwight was up here he explained the whole thing. That was his way of lettin' 'em know they buried her in the wrong place. He didn't want her buried in that particular spot where she's buried.

I guess that one stands out in my mind more than any other unusual thing we put on. I know there's numerous other things, but over see them.

There's a strange verse they used to put on and it's rather a long verse, and I don't know if I can word it like it's supposed to be. Can't think of it.

(Pause B.B. tries to remember.)

The most used is gone but not forgotten. That's the most used in the industry I think. At rest, Rest in peace.

Ted used to tickle me, he'd say "Reckon they've forgotten?"

T.G. Have you ever had anything happen on Halloween?

B.O. We've had people borrow a stone to put in their yard or for Haunted Houses. They've soaped our windows and they'd come in and knock over 2 or 3 stones for meanness, but we got to stand watch till about midnite, and that hasn't happened for quite a while now. The police patrol pretty good now.

Bev. A lot of people came in and want to know if there are people actually buried on our display lot. Then there was this one guy that used to mow down here and Bobby would tell him that somebody was in that mausoleum out there..

(Phone rings answered by Rusty Oliver.)

B.B. He had this set of earphones like you'd plug into a record player or radio and this ol boy was kinda silly-not all there. Bobby would stick that plug into that vent and say "she's breathin' You can hear her breathe in there." And that boy would say Bobby you're lying to me, I ain't gonna listen in there." And for a long time after that, he wouldn't mow around that mausoleum.

T.G. Have you had any problems with your help like that?

B.B. No. not that I can remember, but Ted might have some stories. Colored people get like that. I don't know of any particular incident.

Bev. I guess how people react to death would be a study in itself.

T.G. For example?

Bev. Well. for example this one old lady came in here, she was German. And she wanted us to put her death date on her stone. She was so tore up over her husband's death that she was thinking of suicide. Well of course we wouldn't do that. Well between the time she came in here, and that certain date, she met another old woman who had lost her husband, and she did not kill herself after all.

B.B. Yeah, he was buried out in the Catholic cemetery, and I'd be out there working, and she would be out there sometimes laying down by his grave.

Bev. She claimed she was a Nazi, and she gave no expression what so ever, very straight and staunch. Then we have people who can't break away from the reality that a person is dead.

T.G. What about this grave over in the new part of Fairview Cemetery that is all decorated up? Tell me about that.

Bev. There's been a lot of controversy over that. Harp is the name. They have music playing over there all the time.

B.B. Christmas lights too. They had this arch over the monument and Christmas lights on it and music one Christmas. That's the most unusual happening I've heard of in a cemetery anywhere.

Bev. I don't know, what nationality they are, but I would like to know.

B.B. I would too. They have a gathering out there. One of

the boys will stop by here every other week to but candles for those eternal flames. They last about 50 hours each and he'll buy 2 or 4 at a time and take out there. The mother is the one who's buried out there.

Bev. Isn't there an old Confederate Cemetery out there?

B.B. Over in the old part, there's an old Confederate plot. But I think that they have been moved there, not inn my time, but I believe they have been moved.

Bev. Isn't there a man who is restoring that?

B.B. yeah, there's this boy who's bought several markers. He goes all over the country and if he finds a grave that ain't been robbed, he'll get a marker for it. It started out with just his family- he had a good history of his family- and he'd mark them.

There's another guy that set a couple down inn Nashville.

The Cemetery is supposed to know when you set a stone, but he got in those early one morning and set 'em and they never knew the difference. He said he ain't heard nothin' about it yet.

Then there's John L., who lived down in Logansport, and when he retired, he would buy markers and set 'em for all these old fellers that didn't have a monument. He knew everybody within a 50 or 60 mile radius almost all by first name. He's buried down there in Logansport.

(B.B. tells how John died)

Bev. B.B. tell him about the guide stones.

B.B. Well, I don't know too much to tell about them. It's kinda like that thing over in England, what is it, stove higgins? Well they built one something like it down in Georgia. No one knows who got the money up to build it. The money went through the bank and it must've took a massive amount of money...

Bev. "It's a monument for the conservation of mankind and the preservation of future generations." (Read from descriptions.) It tells what the population of the world should be and to balance things out. Each stone had these things carved in different languages.

B.B. This is a picture of it here, and there stones are set at certain angles.

Bev. No one knows who paid for this. This man came to a bank and said he had a project, but nobody knows who it was. Only the banker and the man who built it know who he is. It was built in 1983.

T.G. Have you ever had any problems with what a customer wants and what you can do because of regulations?

B.B. No, not necessarily, but in Louisville, some cemeteries have regulations on sizes of monuments in certain areas, but we don't here.

Now in a four grave plot, you only put one monument in it.

It goes in the center.

You used to not be able to set a stone after a certain month. Like say between November and April when the ground is froze. People used to be more sensitive about cemeteries than today. T.G. When I was in high school, we used to go to this little cemetery, and if we touched the hands of this statue of Mary, and they were warm, something bad was supposed to happen. Have you heard of anything like that ?

B.B. There used to be alot of superstitions about cemeteries, but I can't remember what they were right off hand. You here alot about people being scared to go in a cemetery at night, or so and so's spirit is riding around, like a haunted house, but I just can't remember any.

Bev. Then there's the way you are buried is the way you stand in marriage, Man on the right, and woman on the left. I don't know why, except for the marriage ceremony why they do that.

B.B. Then there's also they would bury you with your feet to the west, and your head to the east...

Bev. So when God comes, He'll come from the east, and you'll be facing the east.

B.B. Alot of cemeteries will still bury you that way. That wasn't superstition, that was a rule. Now in a four grave plot, they'll all be facing the east, so that they'll be man opposite man, woman opposite woman, Head to toe. So that way, when you face the stone, the man is on the right, but on the other side, facing the stone, the other man would be on the left. We have to be conscious of it so we get the names to correspond on the monument.